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ABSTRACT

Based on recent findings in writing research, this document offers the following recommendations on how teachers can improve the writing skills of their students: (1) spend time on activities that require real writing rather than short answers and fill-in-the-blank exercises; (2) have students spend more time putting their thoughts on paper in a logical, well-organized manner; (3) include research and brainstorming as part of writing assignments; (4) make writing assignments that are meaningful to the students; (5) stress the importance of drafts to the students; (6) respond to the ideas, not only the grammar and punctuation, in students' writings; (7) allow students to choose their own topics; (8) take advantage of writing skills that students use outside the classroom to help teach them in the classroom; (9) reward students who write clearly and concisely; and (10) use writing assignments to help students see that writing can help them in the real world. In addition, the document points out that writing is important because it is functional, stimulating, and therapeutic. (JD)

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RESEARCH IN BRIEF

Manuel J. Justiz, Director

T. H. Bell, Secretary of Education

10 Ways to Improve Writing Skills

Why is writing important?

It is functional. It helps us get practical things done. For instance, it can be used to remind us to do things, to tell others what to do, to apply for a job, to maintain contact with faraway friends, to file an insurance claim, to register a child in school, to write a check... the list could go on and on.

It is stimulating. Writing not only helps provoke thoughts, but helps us organize those thoughts in a logical, concise manner.

It is therapeutic. It allows us to express feelings that may not be easily expressed in face-to-face communication.

Although writing is such an important basic skill, Secretary Bell's National Commission on Excellence in Education reported that only one-fifth of the nation's students can write a persuasive essay.

And businesses complain that they have to spend millions of dollars teaching employees the basics of reading and writing.

Research findings and teachers tell us that students' writing lacks clarity, coherence and organization.

Several years ago the National Institute of Education (NIE) initiated research on writing. Little published research on how to teach writing was found and NIE has since become the major source for writing research. From our work we have discovered that young children are able to write much more and much better than we give them credit for.

Although many findings sponsored by NIE's Writing Research Team are just now beginning to come in, we can already make these recommendations on how teachers can improve the writing skills of their students:

1. Spend time on activities that require real writing rather than on short answers and fill-in-the-blank exercises. Research shows that in elementary school we teach youngsters penmanship, vocabulary, and spelling. In high school, however, only three percent of lesson time is spent on writing assignments of paragraph-length or longer. Students won't learn to write if they don't spend any time writing.

2. Have students spend more time putting their thoughts on paper in a logical, well-organized way. Much instructional time is devoted to the mechanics of writing skills, which most students have mastered. What they haven't mastered is how to organize and write their thoughts coherently.

3. Include research and brainstorming as part of writing assignments. Much work goes into good writing before the writer does the actual writing. Giving students adequate time to plan and prepare helps them become confident that they know enough about a topic to write about it.

4. Make writing assignments that are meaningful to the students. Many assignments are unrelated to the real world and often only slightly related to other events in the classroom. When assignments are important to the lives of students, the quality of their writing increases.

5. Stress the importance of drafts to the students. The process of writing is just as important as the end product. By encouraging students to work

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through several drafts, teachers can provide constructive criticism while the writing is actually happening. Revising and editing are done by all good writers.

Obviously a teacher doesn't have time to read draft after draft. But his or her students do. A teacher can create a 'workshop' environment by dividing the class into small groups. These groups can then share their ideas and criticisms with one another. Only when their papers are in final form will the teacher see them.

6. Respond to the ideas expressed in a writing assignment. All too often students believe a teacher is interested only in the grammar, punctuation, spelling etc. This ignores the true function of writing, which is to convey ideas.

7. Allow students to choose their own topics. When students are allowed to write about something that interests them and are free to select how they are going to express their thoughts, they have more invested in the effort, and they try harder.

8. Take advantage of writing skills that students use outside the classroom to help teach them in the classroom. Just because they don't respond to a writing lesson, don't assume they don't know how to write. An NIE-funded research project in Philadelphia showed that students from an inner-city school who didn't write well in school were writing very elaborate rhymes out on the street. When the teacher incorporated this street activity into the classroom, she discovered that her students were able to write far better than they had previously demonstrated.

9. Reward students who write clearly and concisely. There is a tendency to regard flowery language and the use of big words as good writing. In most cases, just the opposite is true.

10. Use writing assignments to help students see that writing can help them in the real world. Giving them assignments, such as writing a letter to the editor of their school newspaper, developing a resume or filling out a job application, helps show them that good writing skills are useful.

It is very time-consuming to grade writing assignments, especially when classes are large. But many teachers who have tried these methods of teaching writing say the time spent grading the assignments which result is now worth it. They don't mind spending the time reading papers that are interesting, well-organized and convey substantive ideas.

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For information on writing research, contact Dr. Stephen Cahir, NIE, 1200 19th Street N.W. , Mail Stop 6, Washington, D.C. 20208. (For information on other NIE projects, contact Kay McKinney or Laurie Maxwell, same address, telephone 202-254-7900).

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